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Extended book review

Transnational Trade Unionism: dream and reality

Reiner Tosstorff

The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), 1920–1937, Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 2016; 918pp: 9789004236646, Eu 274.00 (hbk); Haymarket Books: Chicago, ILL., USA, 2018; 918pp: 9781608468164, \$55.00 (pbk).

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Global trade unionism has a rich and honourable lineage. It stretches back beyond Marx and the First International to the struggles against imperialism, fascism, and latterly neoliberalism, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Kirk 2003; Croucher and Cotton 2009). Its origins, purposes and history have been analysed in an outstanding, if sometimes neglected, body of work. The focus of investigation has been on the mainstream international federations animated by liberal and social-democratic ideas and actors (see, for example, Carew et al. 2000; Van der Linden 2003; 2010; Van Goethem 2006; Carew 2018). Radical and revolutionary variants have attracted less and arguably insufficient attention. To take what is, perhaps, the most striking example, the ever-expanding scholarship on the Comintern, stimulated by access to the Soviet archives, has not been matched by research into its companion organisation, the Profintern or Red International of Labour Unions (RILU).

Established in July 1921, preceded by an experimental prototype, the International Trade Union Council, RILU aspired to recruit, expand and coordinate the activities of unions led by Communists, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists. Such unions would be linked to the Comintern's affiliated parties and organise the world's wage slaves to combat global capitalism and compete with national unions aligned with the reformist, Amsterdam-based International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). RILU's task was to spearhead a global struggle between an insurgent, post-war trade unionism which would play its part in defending 1917 and overthrowing capitalism in other countries; and the pro-imperialist 'yellow unions', dominated by class-collaborationist 'agents of the bourgeoisie' and committed to integrating the working class into a reconstructed world capitalist order, the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation. Students of RILU have had to rely, hitherto, on fragmentary analysis scattered through E.H.

Carr's multi-volume history of the Russian revolution (Carr 1952; 1953; 1963; 1978) and the occasional article (Swain 1987; Tosstorff 2003). Reference to it is slight in the histories of the national Communist parties and scrutiny is sketchy in studies of its affiliated groups and their leaders (see, for example, Martin 1969; Barrett 1999). The publication in English of Reiner Tosstorff's *The Red International of Labour Unions* (hereafter *RILU*) in a fluent translation by Ben Fowkes, is an extremely welcome and long overdue examination of an organisation frequently treated as a footnote to the Comintern.

In its sixteen-year existence, RILU claimed to represent up to 17 million trade unionists out of an estimated 40 million worldwide. At its peak, it employed 300 staff in Moscow with bureaux in Berlin, Paris and, for a time, Shanghai, a thriving press and a generous budget dispensed from Moscow. In the inter-war years, trade unionism was under pressure around the capitalist globe and the state-backed Russian trade unions constituted RILU's core. Czechoslovakia and France were its strongholds in Europe, although its influence also extended to North and South America, Australia and China. Like its competitor, RILU confronted the intractable difficulties which have substantially restricted international trade union federations to acting as instruments for education; exchange of information; the application of diplomatic leverage on nation states; the organisation of solidarity campaigns – more often focussed on financial support than industrial action; as well as preserving and nurturing the conviction that workers world-wide share a common interest in confronting capital. Like the IFTU, RILU was largely unsuccessful in transcending the national roots and horizons of industrial relations: intervening in collective bargaining, influencing industrial action and protecting workers against employers proved elusive. It was more – and then imperfectly – a meeting place, a consciousness-raiser, a think-tank, and subsequently a bargaining chip in Soviet diplomacy, than a significant protagonist in industrial struggle. Like its rival, it proved incapable of escaping the imprint of the state.

In common with transnational trade union agencies before and after, RILU was handicapped by the heterogeneity, sectionalism, historical particularities and patriotic attachments of the organisations it sought to mobilise. It experienced the debilitating distance, in terms of generating effective action, between international organisation and national organisation and national organisation and the workplace. It encountered in extreme form the limited articulation between formal structures and mobilisation at the point

of production which has dogged trade unionism. At a time when the balance of forces favoured capital, disarticulation was a major problem for unions on national terrain and a massive one beyond it. Moreover, RILU was less successful than the IFTU in developing intermediate sectoral organisation: the latter's International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) better reflected and represented the economic interests of specific groups of workers. RILU's identification with revolution intensified capital's hostile response to reformist trade unionism; its increasing subservience to the Soviet state engendered instability in policy, and attenuation of internal democracy. RILU's history may be roughly divided into four periods: revolutionary optimism and ecumenical aspiration before 1922; retreat into Russian preoccupations, emergent Stalinization and pursuit of a united front with the IFTU, 1923–1927; Stalinization, militant anti-capitalism and onslaught on the 'social fascist' IFTU, 1928–1934; and second phase Stalinization, popular front campaigns for unity and eventual liquidation by Stalin, 1935–1937.

RILU's fragility and demise by diktat should not obscure the promise of its youth. It was conceived in the certainty that Marxists were living through an epoch of war and revolution: 1917 was simply a harbinger of what was to come. If led by revolutionaries in conjunction with the infant Communist parties, trade unionists could play a role in transforming economic struggles so that they contributed to winning political power and go on to defend successful insurrections against capitalist attrition. The problem was that the industrial militancy and political insurgency of the immediate post-war years was contained; after the Communists' decisive defeat in Germany in 1923, revolutions appeared increasingly unlikely (Broué 2005). As Comintern president, Grigori Zinoviev, observed: 'The RILU was founded at a time when it seemed that we might be able to break through the enemy front in a head-on attack and rapidly conquer the trade unions' (*RILU*: 391). Soon after its birth, RILU's midwives were reflecting on whether they had made the right decision.

The choice lay between a trade union division of the Comintern; establishing revolutionary groupings inside the reformist unions; or, as transpired, the formation of a new trade union international, linked to but formally independent of the Comintern (*RILU*: 140–142). That the latter was selected suggests a degree of confusion or compromise. For RILU's foundation more or less coincided with the Comintern, urged on by Lenin, conceding that the line of revolutionary offensive was no longer viable. Capitalist

stabilisation had set in and there was a need to implement united front tactics – which pointed towards work inside the IFTU unions. However, the arguments of the revolutionary syndicalists, whose involvement in the project the Bolsheviks greatly valued, *their* desire for an autonomous international uncontaminated by reformism, may have swung matters. Nevertheless, the decision to create RILU imparted an element of inconsistency to Communist strategy. The first possibility, which could have been combined with the second, permeation of reformist unions via coordination of fraction work by the Comintern, was more consonant with the Bolshevik orientation to extirpating leftism in the interests of vanquishing reformism. This had been expounded and popularised in *Left-Wing Communism* and adopted by the national parties (Lenin 1920, 1965: 36–48).¹

It is difficult to comprehend why Lenin's prescription that Communists should caucus and agitate wherever workers organised, even in the most reactionary of trade unions, should apply nationally but not internationally. As early as 1921, the dissenting German Communist, Paul Levi, pointed up the element of discordance and remarked the contradiction between the Communists' independent position regarding the IFTU, embodied in RILU, while simultaneously operating a policy of 'boring from within' the IFTU's national affiliates. The possibility of changing course was raised – but unsuccessfully (*RILU*: 429–430). Of course, permeation was not without its problems. Communists were typically a small if vociferous minority in reformist unions. The argument that their organisations should break with Amsterdam and affiliate to RILU was often ineffectual and abstract in face of immediate threats to the defensive, material preoccupations of the predominantly reformist rank and file. RILU fomented few secessions from the IFTU. The alliance with the syndicalists and anarchists, in contrast, represented an important advance – although Lenin's equation of the syndicalist notion of 'the conscious minority' with the revolutionary party and only briefly concealed the cracks. In the context of the dominant strain in Bolshevism which asserted party control of union activity, the Soviet leaders exhibited an ability to compromise sometimes overlooked by contemporary critics and latter-day academics. However, autonomy would not endure: limited revolutionary pluralism in RILU prompted the Comintern to gradually assert authority over what some considered 'a den of dissent' (Wolikow 2017: 252).

As Communist parties implemented the united front which acknowledged the continued hegemony of reformism, RILU became an impediment to critical cooperation with the 'yellow unions'. The IFTU dismissed unity as subversive; spurred on by the German unions, they rejected all overtures (*RILU*: 609–673). RILU adopted a more patient approach. It attempted to group left reformists around a core of Communists inside Amsterdam affiliates via RILU 'fractions' with a socialist programme and syndicalist roots – notably the Trade Union Educational League in the US and the National Minority Movement (NMM) in Britain. Syndicalism fractured. A layer of leading exponents, Tom Mann, William Z. Foster, Alfred Rosmer, Pierre Monatte, Andreu Nin and Gaston Monmousseau, represented a current which was assimilated into the national parties. In France, RILU benefitted from a split in the dominant Confédération générale du travail (CGT) – which had mutated from syndicalism to reformism – and a new federation, the Confédération générale du travail unitaire (CGTU), emerged under Communist leadership. However, there were reverses. In Spain, where syndicalism was strong, RILU supporters lost control of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo. By 1923, syndicalists estranged from RILU had launched a new International Workingmen's Association (*RILU*: 582–587, 600–603; Thorpe 1989; Darlington 2008).

As ecumenicism wilted, the united front faltered, significant defections from the IFTU proved illusory and the Soviet state looked inwards, RILU became Russified. The Soviet trade unions made up 20 per cent of its membership and evolved as a quasi-independent actor as they were more firmly incorporated into the party/state. They increasingly pursued opportunities for direct engagement with Amsterdam as incipient Stalinism unfolded and Russian interests took precedence over international revolution. There was limited progress in establishing links with the IFTU's ITSs such as the Transport Workers and the Food Workers. However, success proved temporary and growing tensions emerged between the Russian trade union leader, Mikhail Tomskey, and Alexander Lozovsky. The driving force in RILU, Lozovsky was central to developing its policy and what theory it possessed.² Usually operating within party constraints, he was handicapped in Soviet politics by his past as an unreliable Bolshevik, despite his support for Stalin (*RILU*: 823–832).

The IFTU leaders always regarded Russia more favourably than they regarded RILU and as Comintern attention shifted from Germany to Britain, RILU moved from encouraging abandonment of the

IFTU to demanding entry into it. Elements in Amsterdam and Moscow found limited common ground in the Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Committee established in 1925 to engender unity. The British union leaders had little time for RILU and the initiative involved *realpolitik* on both sides. A brief left turn in the Trades Union Congress coincided with desire to repair diplomatic and trade relations between Britain and Russia and prompted grossly over-optimistic estimations among some Soviet leaders of the revolutionary potential of British trade unionism (Calhoun 1976). Zinoviev hazarded: ‘We have a new chapter in the history of the workers’ movement. We don’t know exactly where the mass Communist Party will come from in England, whether through the door of Stewart and MacManus³ or perhaps through a different door’ (*RILU*: 690). The IFTU majority were prepared to entertain cooperation with the Russian unions – but not RILU – and the bottom line was that entry into the IFTU would be on IFTU terms. It all fell apart: the defeat of the 1926 general strike, the Soviet unions’ savaging of TUC leaders, left and right, and increased enmity between the TUC and the NMM ensured the initiative and the Committee terminated unproductively in 1927.

The Third Period, 1928–1934, with its politics of Class Against Class, was perceived by Lozovsky as presenting RILU with new opportunities. Instead, it exposed its underlying weakness. Once again, the aim was to overwhelm the ‘yellow unions’ in a frontal offensive. RILU fractions would recruit inside the mainstream unions – whose leadership was perceived as embracing ‘social fascism’ in the face of capitalist crisis and proletarian radicalisation – organise the unemployed and, via mass strikes, construct red unions to constitute a Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition. The vast majority of workers demonstrated scant inclination to act out this millenarian script and RILU lacked the human resources and ideological heft to advance it. The outcome was a qualitative reduction in RILU’s already waning influence as its fragments were consigned to the margins of national labour movements (*RILU*: 744–745).

There was a final throw of the dice as Stalinism switched from the extreme left to the right of organised labour. In the aftermath of Hitler’s triumph in Germany, which it had facilitated, Class Against Class gave way to engineering alliances with the ‘progressive’ bourgeoisie and the trade union bureaucracy. Against the background of the Franco-Soviet pact, Russia’s entry into the League of Nations, collective security and the mantra of ‘unity’ to protect the Soviet Union against fascism, RILU constituted a remnant of a best-forgotten past. Its mission was an embarrassment and its autonomy and internal democracy – its

final congress was held in 1930 – a faded memory. Stalin brokered reunification with the CGT in France on the reformists' terms. All over the world, RILU groups and unions were wound down and the Russian unions applied for membership of the IFTU.⁴ As Amsterdam remained intransigent, Georgi Dimitrov suggested, and Stalin approved, the dissolution of RILU. The Bulgarian observed: 'the Profintern not only fails to contribute to the creation of trade union unity but in some sense is even a hindrance to it' (Dallin and Firsov 2000: 24). It was quietly liquidated. Lozovsky survived and his career continued in other fields before he fell victim to Stalin's anti-Semitism and was executed in 1952.

In March 1933, as Stalin's fellow anti-Semites in Berlin settled into their seats of power, Lozovsky reflected: 'The past must help our struggle today. Otherwise it is not worthwhile spending time studying it. The positive and negative experiences acquired in the past must arm us for the struggle for a better future' (Lozovsky 1935: 7). The idea that answers to current difficulties can be deduced from what happened in a different epoch with distinctive characteristics and unique actors in a fashion which illuminates the future is misplaced. Which is not to say that a study of RILU may not enlighten contemporary socialists by posing questions about perennial problems and motivating their pondering. In one sense, the story makes gloomy reading. For it affirms the historic infirmities of socialist internationalism and highlights the elasticity, corrosive power and ability to reinvent itself of nationalism. In this case, the resurgence of capitalist nationalism walked hand-in-hand with the malign hegemony of 'socialism in one country' as the interests of the working class globally were subtly conflated with the interests of an oppressive state which exploited its own working class so that millions could not see any fundamental incompatibility between the two. Imbrication rationalised and rendered consensual among Communists, the authoritarian process by which the RILU was substantially reduced to an appendage of the Comintern, and the Comintern to an NKVD-supervised subsidiary of the Soviet state. The ideology and practice of internationalism was harnessed in both political and trade union spheres to the apparently antithetical politics of nationalism. This, in turn, raises questions concerning the relationship of trade unionism to political organisations and what has been conventionally considered a pillar of classical Marxist thinking, the primacy of the political over the economic and the direction of trade union policy and activity by the revolutionary party. It is incontestable that such a relationship demands at a minimum the fullest democracy. Yet this was a factor singularly

lacking after the early 1920s in RILU, the Comintern and the Russian party/state. The undemocratic bureaucratic centralism which prevailed in RILU facilitated its subordination. Any future revitalisation of the socialist project will demand reinstatement of the conviction that it has to be an egalitarian and democratic global endeavour.

Inserted into the history of transnational trade union organisation generally, RILU's history unquestionably confirms the immense difficulties attached to establishing meaningful trade unionism beyond the nation state. Without strong roots in national movements organically committed at all levels to the practice of working-class internationalism, global federations have, and will, develop as networks for research, education, information dissemination, propaganda and diplomacy, with inadequate ability to organise and coordinate workers' struggles. Lacking a potent independent base, they will orientate towards powerful states and reflect rather than challenge their policies. History has not been kind to those who conceive the struggle for internationalism as engendering emancipation from nationalism. The World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) brought together the IFTU and trade unions from the Soviet bloc in 1945. As the wartime 'Grand Alliance' between Russia and the West disintegrated in face of contradictory interests of Anglo-American imperialism and the Soviet Union, the WFTU split in two (MacShane 1992). The revamped WFTU based on Russia and its satellites and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) then prosecuted the Cold War and the interests of competing state systems as champions of their respective power blocs. In different ways and different forms in imperialist countries and the 'workers' states', the 'national interest' triumphed over internationalism (Carew 2018; McIlroy 2013; Waters and Van Goethem 2013).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, neoliberal globalisation held the field. In the early 21st century, the ICFTU, the federation of Christian unions, and independent federations in Europe and Latin America inaugurated the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Bereft of its Russian base, the WFTU lingered on, a much-mutated residue of Stalinism (Gumbrell-McCormick 2013). The ITUC may constitute a force for good: it possesses few pretensions to radicalism or ability to intervene significantly and successfully in workers' economic struggles. The prospect of any revitalisation of transnational trade unionism hinges on the presently elusive revitalisation of trade unionism at the national level. Even if

achieved, that is unlikely to stimulate a turn to radicalism. Unless it recognises nationalism frequently constitutes a component of trade union consciousness; eschews the reproduction of conventional trade unionism proposed, to one degree or another, by most current advocates; insists on political and democratic transformation; infuses new, independent models of trade unionism with internationalism; and proceeds internationally. Rebuilding from the bottom and replenishing the local and national roots of trade unionism is imperative if a vibrant, global trade unionism is to be reconstructed. More of the same is a recipe for failure. Contemporary union bureaucracies, with few exceptions, have contributed too little to counteracting unfavourable circumstance and have presided over cumulative decline in membership, union density, collective bargaining, industrial action and other forms of workers' protection. A century on, the verdict of Lenin and Lozovsky still rings true: today's union leaders are in no shape to direct recovery and orchestrate the radical change necessary for genuine revitalisation. In a world of tempest-tossed neoliberal capitalism, resilient nationalism, intensifying anti-immigrant populism, growing protectionism, Brexit, Erdogan, Orbán, Netanyahu and Trump, transformative trade union resurgence seems a tall order.

Remembering the aspirations and efforts of the architects and adherents of RILU may help keep alive the dream of socialist trade unionism. So long as we acknowledge the reality: RILU proved unable to either significantly overcome the constraints of an attritional environment, capitalist and Stalinist, and, in consequence, proved unable to significantly protect workers against exploitation or challenge it. As Tosstorff demonstrates in impressive detail, its fate was bound up with the trajectory of the Soviet Union, although it was far from determined. In what will become the standard text on the subject, he does full justice to the factors making for both subordination and resistance, depicting the complexities and contested nature of RILU's voyage to vassalage, yet highlighting the role of human agency. This is a richly peopled tale but one which never loses sight of structural circumscription.

It is a political history rather than a 'from below' recuperation of Communist activity around the world and the text is front-loaded, 'shaped like an onion so that it grows thinner in later years in line with the narrowing of [RILU's] area of effectiveness' (*RILU*: 7). Employment of criteria of significance eliminates much of the extraneous detail which mars many institutional histories while curtailment only occasionally compromises completeness. If I may be permitted one parochial example, the NMM disappears from the

narrative at the turn of the 1920s. However, between 1932 and 1934 its bureau developed a new function, in harmony with the Third Period but distinct from its earlier manifestations, becoming a subterranean animator of ‘independent’ rank-and-file movements – outside the NMM but controlled by the party. The perspective was the creation of a new Trade Union Militant League which would replace the NMM as an umbrella for the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition. In summer 1934, that perspective fell foul of the turn to popular frontism. But the experience may help explain how the isolated, millenarian propagandists of 1930 acquired the trade union-craft they exhibited as organisers for the reformist unions after 1935 (McIlroy 2015; 2016).

RILU is recommended to all interested in Communism and trade unionism. My only reservations are the failure to complement the valuable biographical glossary with a chronology and an index which extends beyond a list of names. Both would have facilitated study of a packed text. The exorbitant cost of the hardback is once more ameliorated by the excellent paperback service Haymarket Books continues to provide for all interested in Marxism.

Endnotes

¹ ‘To refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie ...’ (Lenin 1920, 1965: 44). Lenin castigated revolutionaries who rejected membership of unions ‘on the pretext that they are “reactionary”!! and invent a brand-new, immaculate little “Workers’ Union”, which is guiltless of bourgeois-democratic prejudices.’ (ibid.: 45). Comparisons might be drawn between the latter and *RILU*.

² Between 1920 and 1935, Lozovsky published polemics as well as discussions of Marxist analyses of trade unionism (see *RILU*: 886–887). His 1933 book, published in London two years later (Lozovsky 1935), was written in dogmatic vein: ‘Our entire policy, strategy and tactics proceed from the following thesis of Lenin ... *The doctrine of Marx is all-powerful because it is correct*’ (ibid.: 186; original emphasis). It is studded with comments such as: ‘This problem has been worked out and solved by the best pupil of Marx and Lenin, Comrade Stalin’ (ibid.: 180).

³ Bob Stewart (1877–1973) and Arthur MacManus (1889–1927) were leaders of British Communism in the 1920s.

⁴ The IFTU refused to accede to Stalin’s conditions for the entry of the Russian trade unions and unity waited on wartime collaboration and the fleeting post-war honeymoon between East and West.

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